

Grassroots effort to deal with affordable housing

Publisher's note: This is one in a series of stories about affordable housing in the Lake Tahoe-Truckee region. All articles may be accessed via the home page under Special Projects, 2017 Affordable Housing.

By Terra Breeden

Most of the single-family homes in South Lake Tahoe sit empty. They are second homes, used by the owners only a handful of times a year, or as vacation rentals.

Affordable housing options have become limited in South Lake Tahoe and around the lake. There simply are not enough long-term rental homes or affordable subdivisions to house the local population. Many residents are forced to pay an inflated monthly rent in order to secure a decent living situation, stay in hotel rooms for extended periods of time, or move to less expensive areas like Minden and Gardnerville.



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—Sue Novasel, El Dorado County supervisor

Because of the housing crisis, South Lake Tahoe is losing many of its longstanding current residents and potential newcomers.

This creates a community where actual residents are scarce and vacationers are plentiful.

“Seventy-five percent of our residents are in a low income bracket,” El Dorado County Supervisor Sue Novasel said at a meeting Feb. 10. “There are 1,800 employees who come here for the winter and we can’t get them to stay in Tahoe. In my mind, there is no difference between workforce housing and affordable housing. So now we are asking, ‘what are people’s needs’ and looking at the economic side of it.”

Progress for Tahoe hosted a community meeting at Mountain Lab on Friday to discuss the South Lake Tahoe housing crisis. Progress for Tahoe, a grassroots movement founded last year, has declared the lack of affordable housing to be one of the most pressing issues facing South Lake Tahoe residents. The meeting was attended by about 20 community members from El Dorado County officials to concerned residents.



“As a local, I wanted to be at this meeting and let the community know about their options,” founder of the Tahomes Facebook page and South Lake Tahoe resident Kelsey Adams said. “A lot of people are into affordable housing, but I have to turn down about 30 people who

are looking for homes each day.”

At the meeting, attendees broke into small groups and brainstormed solutions to the housing crisis. They discussed a variety of proposed ideas, from improving the balance of vacation home rentals and long-term rentals in South Lake Tahoe to reviving the Silent Second Mortgage program. Any idea that might create more affordable housing in the community was considered.

Crested Butte, Colo., a ski resort town similar to South Lake Tahoe, was introduced as a model of what a small community can do to build affordable housing for its residents. Crested Butte has built multiple affordable housing units (without relying on grants or government money) by issuing a \$2,000 to \$50,000 fee for building new homes in the area and installing a public transportation tax. The money gathered from these incentives is put into a community pot that is used explicitly to build affordable housing for its long-term residents.

“We want to honor the fact that we live in a beautiful place and it’s sensitive to development, but if we look at communities like these, we see that it can be done,” a woman in the audience said.

Other ideas discussed at the meeting included reviving the Silent Second Mortgage program, a program that helps people who make less than \$60,000 a year purchase homes. Troy Matthews, a member of the Progress for Tahoe steering committee, wants to make an appointment with the city manager to see if the city of South Lake Tahoe can reinstate the program.

Zoning South Lake Tahoe neighborhoods so that ratios of vacation home rentals, second homes, and long-term rentals are equalized was another solution proposed at the Progress for Tahoe community meeting. By zoning neighborhoods, the belief is the city could create a required ratio of long-term rentals for residents and help solve the housing crisis.

Everyone at the meeting agreed that there is a substantial shortage of long-term home rentals for families and short-term rentals for Heavenly Ski Resort employees in South Lake Tahoe. But building one affordable housing unit is not going to solve the housing crisis. And there are several obstacles to building new homes in Lake Tahoe. The cost to even put a shovel in the soil and break ground is humongous due to zoning and government fees.

However, Novasel has put together a task force to look at what can be done to reduce building fees and to collect data on current housing conditions in South Lake Tahoe.

“We want to look at zoning, fees, and the fact that we have limited space to build,” Novasel said. “These are the three major barriers to building more affordable housing.”